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AUTHOR Courtright, John A.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay was to propose a new explanation of collective behavior and to hypothesize the role of communication in this process. Unlike previous theories, which rely on a group effect, this explanation is based on the behavior of individual members of the collectivity. Using the experimental finding of the "risky shift," or the tendency in group decision making to exercise less caution when exposed to group influence, this essay summarizes the research history of the "risky shift," presents two different theories proposed to explain this finding, and examines the manner in which small groups become more risky/cautious as a function of group context. In addition, an extrapolation of small group behavior to the larger collectivity is provided. The implications of cultural values and communications strategies for collective behavior are summarized. (Author/KS)

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Collective Behavior and The Risky Shift: A Theory of Communication Strategy

by

John A. Courtright

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Department of Speech and Dramatic Art
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa 52240

CS 501 371

Collective Behavior and The Risky Shift:
A Theory of Communication Strategy

Numerous attempts have been made to explain the phenomenon of "violent" collective behavior. Historically, Le Bon ascribed it to the lowered intelligence of the crowd which caused individuals to lose self control, release their primitive aggressive impulses, and be easily swayed by the slogans and harangues of their leaders.[1] Freud, on the other hand, thought that libidinal ties forged a group unity which manifested itself in a "group mind."[2] In a more contemporary theory, Turner suggests the concept of an "emerging group norm."[3] Generally, his theory states that a small minority of the crowd establishes aggressive behavior as the new group norm, and other members of the collectivity feel socially constrained to conform to this normative value. Finally, from the sociological frame of reference, Smelser proposes his "value-added determinants" theory of collective behavior.[4] Elegant in its constuction, Smelser's theory formulates a series of situational variables which must exist in a given instance of collective behavior if violence is to be the result.

The purpose of this essay is to propose yet another theoretical explanation of collective behavior. This explanation, however, will differ from those previously mentioned in two important ways. First, it is intended to

emphasize strategic communication as the most important element in understanding and predicting the process of collective behavior. Its primary questions, then, are what psychological processes underlie violent collective behavior, and how are they correlated with communication variables in a manner which will explain both the exacerbation and inhibition of violent collective behavior?

Second, unlike many other psychological explanations of its type, this position does not advocate a "true group effect." The theories of Freud, Le Bon, and Turner, for example, all postulate some form of conformity effect as the primary mechanism which operates in violent collective behavior. My disagreement with the conformity paradigm lies in the fact that (1) it has been experimentally called into question by the paradigm I will propose below, and (2) in the Gestaltist framework, it relies on a true group effect--an effect which basically suggests that the whole (the group) is more than the sum of its parts (the individual members).[3]

My explanation, which relies on the experimental finding known as the "risky shift," predicts outcomes similar to the other theories I have mentioned, but does so by conceptualizing different psychological processes. That is, it analyzes collective behavior from the standpoint of the individual behaviors which comprise it.[4] Not only does

this frame of reference allow for experimental confirmation in both the laboratory and the field, but, as we shall see later, it makes it easier to "translate" the theory and experimental findings from the small group context to the context of collective behavior.

II

The phenomenon called risky shift was first discovered by Stoner in 1961.[7] In several experiments which were designed to test the effects of group conformity, Stoner found that in certain situations individuals did not conform to a group norm when the proper amount of risk was the question at hand. On the contrary, he discovered that after group discussion, individual members of a group tended to increase the amount of risk they thought appropriate for the situation. Briefly, the experimental procedure he employed followed a pre-test/group discussion/post-test format.[8] In the pre-test, hypothetical "choice-dilemma" situations were proposed. These situations required the subject to choose one of several alternatives which varied in the amount of risk they carried. After making the most risky choice thought proper, subjects were placed into small groups where they discussed the same problems. When these discussions were

concluded, the subjects were again asked to fill out the choice-dilemma questionnaires. In both the original experiment and in numerous replications, researchers found that a group norm was not established. Rather, individuals significantly increased their level of risk taking as measured by the post-test questionnaire.

As replications became more numerous, theoretical explanations began to emerge. One of the most prominent was proposed by Wallach, Kogan, and Bem.[9] These researchers maintained that the risky shift was a function of (1) affective bonds within the group (similar to Turner's suggestion that crowd members cannot be anonymous to each other, but need to be so from regime officials outside of the collectivity[10]), and (2) a diffusion of responsibility among group members for making the more risky decision. In other words, members of the group subsequently became more risky because they felt less individual responsibility for doing so. (Similarly, this concept of diffusion of responsibility is one which has been explored in the literature of violent collective behavior.[11])

This paradigm received a setback, however, when Stoner later discovered that certain choice-dilemma situations regularly produced a cautious shift by individual members after they had experienced group discussion.[12] Clearly,

this effect cannot be accounted for by the diffusion of responsibility model, yet the experimental finding has been replicated many times. In short, the finding had a disconfirming effect on the Wallach et al. paradigm.

In contrast, one conceptual paradigm does seem capable of predicting both the risky and cautious shifts. For that reason, it now is considered the most valid explanation of the phenomenon. In 1965, Roger Brown published the "cultural value" theory of the risky shift.[13] Later, it was expanded to encompass the cautious shift. Brown maintains that there are two elements which determine if a group will be more risky/cautious than individuals. Initially, the individual makes a private decision about the value associated with a social situation. The presence of the group, therefore, acts to make this previously ascribed value more salient. Brown further suggests that this dominant cultural value "censors the flow" of communication in the group, so that rhetorical appeals which espouse alternative values become less frequent. The group, then, tends to facilitate the acceptance of the cultural value, the inhibition of competing values, and the performance of the behavior which the cultural value implies.

In the second step, members of the group communicate to each other the level of risk they are willing to take.

This communication defines a form of "social reality" against which the individual member can compare his level of risk/caution. Finally, since the value is culturally approved (at least by the new social reality), and because people who display greater quantities of it are accorded higher esteem (e.g., bravery), members increase their original level of the value so as to be more risky/cautious than other group members.

Theoretically, the outcome is a heightened level of behavior, which exceeds the amount that the individual would have normally performed. In essence, a shift toward risk/caution is achieved because members are trying to outdo each other for the honor of displaying the most of that value.

Because the risky shift phenomenon is based on an analysis of individual behavior, the transition from the small group to the large collectivity is made easier. That is, the philosophical suppositions which are the foundation for such a transition are well within logical bounds. In order to make the transition, one must realize that the social context in which a mob, crowd, or group gathers also has a cultural value inherent within it. In other words, the elements of anonymity, diffusion of responsibility, Smelser's situational determinants, and the communication strategies of the leaders of the collectivity all play a

part in deciding if the situation is one which merits a value of risk or one of caution. For this reason, the risky shift explanation does not deny or deprecate other explanations. Instead, it synthesizes and incorporates these variables as mechanisms which aid in the determination of the proper cultural value.

Once the collectivity has formed, the value of the social situation which surrounds it is made salient and is enhanced. Moreover, the intracollective communication will be "censored" so as to support the contextual value-- whether it be risky (strike, riot, obstructive sit-in), or cautious (non-violent demonstration, or even non-action[14]). Hence, as the group interaction progresses, (1) as social reality is communicated and established, (2) the individual member compares his level of risk/caution against that reality, and (3) he shifts his personal value level so as to perceive himself as possessing more of the socially desired value.

This explanation makes it easier to understand and analyze either the spiraling level of violence which often accompanies collective behavior or the peaceful, nonviolent situations which occasionally occur. Furthermore, it is capable of explaining why single members of a collectivity do not become more violent/nonviolent-- i.e., they reject the cultural value in question, there is poor communication

of the new social reality, etc. As I shall suggest later, this model allows analysts to code and catalogue the communicative strategies and subsequent behaviors which have been observed in past social situations involving collectivities. Such coding would provide a more detailed analytic tool for both future theory and specific case study.

III

Throughout this essay, I have implied that the risky shift model would be useful to the analysts who study collective behavior from a communication standpoint. With its emphasis on the use of communication to enhance and make salient cultural values, and to establish a situational reality, this theory implies that strategic communication could be used to shape these perceptions. This section, therefore, will be a brief statement and explication of these various communication requirements.

Initially, the individual comes to a situation involving a collectivity with his own assessment of the values relevant to it. It seems likely, however, that rhetorical appeals could aid in the formulation of this assessment. That is, the way in which the situation is described prior to its occurrence--its purposes, goals,

methods--could persuade people to adopt a specific value for the situation. Clearly, the leaders of such an event (assuming they possess some degree of sophistication) have decided what outcome would be most beneficial. By appealing to values which coincide with this desired outcome, they should be able to exert some control over the behavior of the collectivity.[13]

Once the collectivity has formed, the desired value must be made salient in the minds of the individual members. Thus, all symbolic appeals should clearly communicate this value. These appeals, however, must serve two additional functions. First, they must define as proper a level of risk/caution which exceeds the level originally held by the members of the collectivity.[14] Secondly, verbal appeals should direct attention toward elements of the situation which favor the behavioral consequences of holding the value. These elements, for example, might be such familiar concepts as anonymity, diffusion of responsibility, group unity, etc. Whatever their content, they must stress that the behavior which the value implies is the proper one for the situation.

If these rhetorical demands are met, the risky shift analysis would maintain that individuals would modify the amount of risk/caution they originally possessed. This modification, of course, should occur in the direction

prescribed by the rhetorical appeals. The risky shift model, therefore, not only contributes to our understanding of how communication functions in this context, but also suggests how it can be used to shape and modify the behavior of large masses of people.

Since neither time nor space allows this theory to be applied through a case study, I will briefly suggest several ways in which this explanation could be validated. One of the most obvious would be to design a modified risky shift experiment--modified in that the number of subjects would be increased to simulate a larger collectivity, and the choice-dilemma items would be written in the form of collective behavior situations. This procedure, of course, would provide only the most minimal information on whether the model was applicable to this context.

A more interesting investigation might be undertaken on the topic of cultural values. That is, films, speeches, and other sources of information concerning a given instance of collective behavior would be presented to subjects. They would then be asked to express the values they perceive in the situation by filling out a semantic differential scale. If it is found that different situations elicit different values, and these values can be correlated to the actual outcome of a collective event, the paradigm would gain strong support.

Finally, more detailed analyses and case studies could be initiated--studies which specifically employ the risky shift model. These analyses would concentrate on the cultural values and how they were (or were not) modified by communication strategies. Again, if the real life events fit into the risky shift framework, strong support for the paradigm would be gained.

In summary, this essay has offered a new look at the phenomenon of collective behavior. By using the experimental finding called the risky shift, it has attempted to explain group behavior by focusing on the psychological processes of individual members. More importantly, it has emphasized stratetgic communication as the most notable variable in understanding these processes. This essay, however, marks only the beginning of this development. With more concise thinking, constructive criticism, and experimental results, the risky shift model can aid in our understanding of the relationship among psychology, communication, and collective behavior.

NOTES

[1]Gustave Le Bon, The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1896), p. 25.

[2]See, Stanley Milgram and Hans Toch, "Collective Behavior: Crowds and Social Movements," in Handbook of Social Psychology, IV, ed. by Gardner Lindzey (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 546-549.

[3]Ralph H. Turner, "Collective Behavior," in Handbook of Modern Sociology, ed. by Robert E.L. Faris (Chicago: Rand McNally Co., 1964), pp. 389-392. This theory, of course, arose out of Turner and Killian's Collective Behavior (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957).

[4]Neil J. Smelser, Theory of Collective Behavior (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

[5]A good general summary of the conformity model can be found in Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, Human Interaction in the Small Group Setting (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merril Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 65-79. For a more detailed, philosophical discussion of the issue, see, Ernest Gellner, "Holism Versus Individualism," in Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, ed. by May Brodbeck (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968), pp. 254-268.

[6]An analysis which approaches group behavior from this standpoint is usually labelled "reductionist" in nature. This position eschews the concept of "metaphysical holism," and maintains that group behavior is merely a function of the behavior of the individual members. See, May Brodbeck, "Methodological Individualism: Definition and Reduction," in Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, ed. by May Brodbeck (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968), pp. 280-303. Cf. J.W.N. Watkins, "Methodological Individualism and Social Tendencies," Ibid., pp. 269-280.

[7]J.A.F. Stoner, "A Comparison of Individual and Group Decisions Involving Risk," (unpublished Master's thesis, School of Industrial Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1961).

[8]For a more detailed discussion of the procedures and findings of the risky shift experiments, see, Kenneth L.

Dion, Robert S. Baron, and Norman Miller, "Why Do Groups Make Riskier Decisions Than Individuals?," in Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, V, ed. by Leornard Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1970), pp. 305-377. See also, Amiram Vinokur, "Review and Theoretical Analysis of the Effects of Group Processes upon Individual and Group Decisions Involving Risk," Psychological Bulletin, 76 (October, 1971), 231-150. Cf., Russell D. Clark, III, "Group-Induced Shift Toward Risk: A Critical Appraisal," Ibid., pp. 251-270.

[9]M.A. Wallach, N. Kogan, and Daryl J. Bem, "Diffusion of Responsibility and Level of Risk Taking in Groups," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 68 (1964), 263-274.

[10]See, Handbook of Modern Sociology, pp. 391-392.

[11]Cf., Handbook of Social Psychology, p. 580. See also, Ted Robert Gurr, Why Men Rebel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 288.

[12]J.A.F. Stoner, "Risky and Cautious Shifts in Group Decisions: The Influence of Widely Held Values," Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 4 (1968), 442-459. For the earliest discussion of the cautious shift, see, F. Nordhoy, "Group Interaction in Decision-Making Under Risk (unpublished Master's thesis, School of Industrial Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1962).

[13]Roger Brown, Social Psychology (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 698-706.

[14]Although "non-action" seems somewhat incongruous in the context of collective behavior, an excellent example of this was a "marijuana smoke-in" held on the University of Iowa campus last spring. In an effort to protest against laws pertaining to marijuana, several students organized a mass "smoke-in." Several hundred people attended the rally, yet the event failed to materialize. Apparently, the police changed the value to one of caution when they arrested the leaders and spokespersons before the event got underway. Also, their strategy of being highly visible (as opposed to previous demonstrations when they waited until mass law breaking was underway before they appeared) had a dampening effect on the value of risk in the situation. The obvious outcome was that the demonstrators went home--cautiously and unstoned.

[15]If the collective situation arises from an ongoing social movement, the communicative demands become easier to fulfill. That is, the occurrence of other, ideologically related collective situations indicates that (1) rhetorical strategies have previously been formulated, (2) cultural values for these situations have been established, and (3) patterns of behavior have been defined as appropriate and/or successful. Organizers of the new collectivity, therefore, need only exploit these existing dimensions in order to meet their communicative requirements. For an enlightening discussion of how social movements develop and employ "metaphors" to serve these functions, see, Arthur L. Smith, "Historical and Social Movements: A Search for Boundries" (paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Chicago, Ill., December, 1972).

[16]It would seem, however, that if the newly espoused level of risk/caution is to have the predicted effect, it must be realistic. That is, it may advocate behavior which is "one unit" more risky/cautious (blocking traffic), but not behavior which exceeds the original level by two or three units (breaking windows, burning and looting, etc.). To do so, I believe, would be to open the door for a boomerang effect. A leader or spokesperson who advocated this excessively risky/cautious behavior, would stand a good chance of losing credibility and perhaps their position of leadership. Rhetorical appeals, therefore, must call for behavior changes, but not changes which will be deemed as excessive or unnecessary.